

Deaf Education and You: Finding the Right Program

An Honors Thesis (HONR 499)

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Abstract

The quality of a student's education begins with his or her teachers. It is important for teachers to be experienced in their field of study, especially when it comes to Deaf education. Deaf educators must be knowledgeable in the area of Deaf culture and proficient in American Sign Language. When selecting a program, future teachers need to take into consideration the type of students they want to work with. This should impact the program they enter. Programs differ in the amount of hands on experience provided, how much focus is placed on disabilities, the approach in which the information is taught, and the focus on language fluency. This paper discusses the Deaf education programs and expectations of six schools including: California State University – Northridge, Gallaudet University, McDaniel College, National Technical Institute for the Deaf (NTID), Lamar University, and Ball State University.

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It is vital for a student going into education to take into consideration the type of educational experience they will receive, what they hope to gain out of their program and the differences between the programs offered. A future educator needs to be aware of what age level they want to teach and what type of students they are looking to have in their classroom. The type of students an educator wants to teach can impact the type of degree they will be working towards. Particularly for Deaf education, the teaching approaches and the amount of exposure they receive in their field of study must prepare the student for their future classroom. These elements vary between programs. Throughout college, future teachers begin to develop their teaching styles and how they will approach their students. When evaluating Deaf education programs, it is important to understand the terms associated with Deaf education and the significance behind Deaf culture. The education of a Deaf student is different from that of a hearing student. It is essential for educators to be aware of these differences in order to impact their students appropriately, giving them the best possible education.

Deafness is a person's inability to hear, or a "loss of hearing". Deafness is also a culture. Deaf culture has history, art, values, attitudes and norms that make it just as unique as any other culture ("Deaf Culture", 2014). Its history and attitudes are influential on an individual's cultural perspectives. A person does not necessarily have to be deaf to be a part of the Deaf culture. Often, family members of Deaf individuals, interpreters, and people who socialize with Deaf people, including Deaf educators, are considered part of the Deaf community. Acceptance into the Deaf community is largely based on the ability to use American Sign Language (ASL). ASL is the main language used in the Deaf community. Hearing children of Deaf parents and hearing siblings of a Deaf child, often end up identifying themselves as a part of the Deaf community since they are raised in this culture. Helping students become a part of their community means

teaching them the culture and language involved. Culture is learned through immersion. Therefore, this teaching comes from the people they are around: parents, guardians, coaches, and school staff. Perhaps one of the best ways to achieve this immersive learning is through residential school. Many Deaf schools are residential, meaning students are around people who are Deaf or involved in Deaf culture everyday. "Next to coming from a Deaf family or a family with some fluent sign communication skills, many view residential life as the ideal opportunity for students who are Deaf to become familiar with and [immersed] into the Deaf community" (Gilliam, Easterbrooks, & ERIC, 1997). This means; however, individuals in contact with these students need to be a part of the Deaf community as well. A teacher needs to be able to incorporate a student's culture into his or her classroom. If a hearing teacher graduates college with a degree in Deaf education, he or she must be able to use that degree and fluency in ASL to give his or her students the most beneficial learning experience in both an educational and cultural sense.

There are numerous ways to look at education in the classrooms today. "A social constructivist approach to education places the teacher in the strategic role of encouraging learning and development of a social and cultural activity" (Marschark, 2002). If we look at the world of education in this manner, it is the teachers job to use the students' background knowledge and life experiences when presenting new information to encourage learning and growth. This is important for teachers of the Deaf to do inside of their classrooms. As a hearing teacher entering the Deaf community, it is critical for that teacher to become comfortable and accustomed with the Deaf culture and the use of ASL inside of the classroom. If a hearing teacher is encouraging learning and development at a social and cultural level for Deaf students, then that hearing teacher needs to set up their environment for a Deaf student, not a hearing

student. A general education mainstream classroom might be set up differently if sign language is not being used. Those classrooms might not be seen as "Deaf friendly" by the way they are set up. It is important for Deaf students to be able to see those around them, especially the teacher. If the room has barriers in it, it may be difficult for some students to interact with each other. General education classrooms most likely do not include elements of the Deaf community. "Sign language - if acquired fast - enables very young Deaf children to have early and full communication with their parents as opposed to spoken languages. It also plays an important role in the cognitive and social development of Deaf children..." ("Ten reasons", 2008). This is where the immersion into the Deaf community is essential for a hearing teacher. Especially when it comes to using American Sign Language and being able to communicate with students fluently.

Students who are placed into a mainstream setting instead of a residential school may only get exposure to language and culture through one Deaf and Hard of Hearing teacher. This is one reason it is extremely important for the teacher to be experienced and knowledgeable when it comes to the Deaf community. American Sign Language is not the only form of communication for Deaf students. The most popular form of education for Deaf students is bilingual education. The concept of bilingual education is where students are taught using both ASL and English together. Although bilingual education is very popular, many students also use total communication or an oral method of communication as well ("Deaf Education", 2014).

Since it is very likely there will only be one Deaf and Hard of Hearing teacher in the mainstream school or even the school district, that teacher becomes the single point of contact in the school for information about deafness. It is vital for that teacher to be proficient in operating equipment and to be able to determine the best form of communication (based on student need

and parent preference). They must know how to access resources and accommodations for the student and to adequately address all other issues that may arise, specific to Deaf education.

Another challenge facing educators in a mainstream situation is students with multiple disabilities. There may be a student who is Deaf, but also has an emotional disability or a cognitive disability. If a teacher has no additional training other than in deafness or hearing loss, he or she may have difficulty with a student who has a mild disability. All teachers can benefit from taking a course on how to properly teach students with multiple disabilities. However, classes are no substitute for hands on experience when approaching students with additional needs. It is important for teachers to realize when going into this field, that their student's education starts with them. This means they first need to be properly educated throughout their college career so when they enter the school system they are able to fulfil the needs of their students. There are many educational programs offered around the U.S. for elementary and secondary education. Fewer colleges offer Deaf education degrees. With the aforementioned necessities of a Deaf educator, these colleges must be reviewed and selected carefully.

There are over 60 residential Deaf schools located around the United States ("U.S. State", 2012). Wyoming, Nevada and Nebraska are the only states that do not have residential Deaf schools ("U.S. State", 2012). This means 47 states have residential schools as well as non-residential schooling for students who are Deaf and hard of hearing. Many Deaf students are also mainstreamed into the general education classrooms. Within the U.S. only 35 states offer some kind of college program allowing students to receive a degree in Deaf education ("Deaf Education Teacher", 2012). Ball State University is the only university in Indiana that offers a degree in Deaf education. Every school is different, offering a variety of courses and requirements students must meet in order to graduate.

Although there are multiple Deaf education programs to choose from, some focus more on general education while others are more specialized. There is a vast difference between graduate programs and undergraduate programs. Graduate programs are much more specialized and detailed in their classes for Deaf students. Undergraduate programs have to incorporate both the background knowledge and basis of education while adding in the specialized field. Here are a few schools that are located in the United States that offer a major in Deaf education. These schools include: California State University – Northridge, Gallaudet University, McDaniel College, National Technical Institute for the Deaf (NTID), Lamar University, and Ball State University.

California State University – Northridge offers a masters in special education, specialized in Deaf and hard of hearing. They require multiple courses focused on educating diverse learners with disabilities as well as working with their families (“Programs”, 2015). The University’s course catalog outlines students going through this program must participate in advanced clinical practices and comprehensive research studies (2015). It also states that the program requires thirty hours of course credit to graduate (2015). They also offer two other programs for the Deaf and hard of hearing. One program is a traditional education specialist teaching credential program in Deaf and hard-of-hearing which requires 49 credit hours (“Programs”, 2015). The other program is an intern education specialist program in the Deaf and hard-of-hearing requires 52 hours (“Programs”, 2015). These programs align the philosophy of teaching students with disabilities and working with their families. They require students to complete a course in auditory and spoken English (“Programs”, 2015). This gives future educators’ knowledge and experience in an alternative form of teaching Deaf students other than bilingual education. Both programs require multiple field experience courses in both

Deaf and special education settings (“Programs”, 2015). Students receive hands on experience with all types of children in which they encounter. The programs at California State University – Northridge are extremely specialized on the specific aspects of Deaf education. For all three programs, students are required to pass the American Sign Language Proficiency Interview (ASLPI) before they are allowed to continue into student teaching (“Programs”, 2015). Both the elementary and secondary program at this university are Council on Education of the Deaf (CED) accredited (“Deaf Education Teacher”, 2012).

Gallaudet University in Washington D.C. is different from all other universities because it is the first and only liberal art university for the Deaf and hard of hearing in the United States. Any hearing student attending Gallaudet must be fluent in American Sign Language. This is demonstrated when applicants pass the ASLPI upon admission (“Hearing”, 2015). The application says students must also interview with the office of administration and record a video essay in ASL (2015). All courses at Gallaudet are taught using ASL. When it comes to the language part of Deaf education at Gallaudet, all students must be fluent and use sign language throughout their entire college career. Gallaudet offers many different education programs for both graduate and undergraduate. They offer a Bachelor of Arts degrees in education, specializing in early childhood education, elementary education, or secondary education (“Department”, 2015). These degrees require a language class on American Sign Language and Deaf culture, at least one course on teaching students with disabilities, and at least 100 hours of field experience (“B.A.”, 2015). The other courses at Gallaudet for the undergraduate degrees are focused on deaf-specific aspects of education, focusing on teaching Deaf children and addressing their needs. Teachers graduating from Gallaudet are graduating with the intention of teaching or working with students who are Deaf or hard of hearing.

The graduate program at Gallaudet is extremely specialized as well. They offer six different specialized programs for students who want to receive their masters in Deaf education (“Department”, 2015). Gallaudet has information about all of their programs on their website, included in their course catalog. They offer a program for individuals that have a bachelor's degree in education but want to extend it to Deaf education. They also offer one for students that have a bachelor's degree in Deaf education but want to become more specialized in this field. One program is for international students and the other three are the same specializations offered for undergraduate degrees. The requirements for graduate degrees are very similar to those for undergraduate programs. The early childhood education, elementary and secondary programs at Gallaudet have a CED accreditation (“Deaf Education Teacher”, 2012).

McDaniel College is similar to Gallaudet University in the way the Deaf education program operates and its main focus. “Philosophically, the program views Deaf students from a cultural perspective. For graduates, that translates into a genuine acceptance of and respect for the language and culture of Deaf people, as well as a driving commitment to provide students with experiences that encourage literacy development and academic achievement” (“M.S. in Deaf Education”, 2015). All students must pass the American Sign Language Proficiency Interview before gaining admission into this college (“M.S. in Deaf Education”, 2015). All classes are taught in ASL, so students will graduate the program with reinforced fluency. McDaniel College offers a course on auditory and spoken language similar to the one offered by California State University – Northridge. According to the M.S. in Deaf Education website, McDaniel College offers a class focused on the bilingual approach to education and requires the students to perform a practicum experience before they graduate (2015). The Deaf Education program at McDaniel College requires 30 credit hours to complete (“M.S. in Deaf Education”,

2015). The McDaniel College website also states students can add on 15 more credit hours to become an ASL specialist or 18 more hours to receive a specialization in literacy (2015). This Deaf education program prepares students to be a certified teacher of the Deaf from kindergarten to 12th grade and a literacy specialist from kindergarten through 12th grade. This program is also CED accredited (“Deaf Education Teacher”, 2012).

Another Deaf education program is in New York. The National Technical Institute for the Deaf (NTID) is one of 9 colleges offered at Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT) (“NTID”, n.d.). More than 1,200 Deaf and Hard of Hearing individuals are a part of NTID, giving hearing students great opportunity to interact with Deaf individuals and become more fluent with their signing skills (“NTID”, n.d.). The only Deaf education program offered at NTID is a masters in secondary education. The secondary education course catalog for NTID shows that the masters program includes classes such as Psychology and Human Development, Issues in Mainstreamed Education, ASL in Instructional Delivery, Literacy and the Deaf Adolescent (n.d.). This program includes both a practicum and student teaching. “Students are required to complete a minimum of 250 hours of supervised student teaching, working with Deaf and hard-of-hearing students at the secondary (7–12) grade level. In addition, 100 hours of field experience must be completed before the first student teaching placement” (“Secondary Education”, n.d.). This gives future teachers many opportunities to interact with students and to become comfortable within the classroom. McDaniel College and Gallaudet University require students to take the American Sign Language Proficiency Interview before they are admitted because all the courses are taught in ASL. Students at NTID are required to pass the American Sign Language Proficiency Interview at an intermediate level before they can graduate with a degree in Deaf education (“Secondary Education”, n.d.). All of NTID’s courses are taught in

ASL, helping to reinforce this language and truly immerse hearing students and Deaf students together. Hearing and Deaf students alike are able to take courses not only through NTID but through RIT as well because these courses offer an ASL interpreter. This program has its CED accreditation in secondary education (“Deaf Education Teacher”, 2012).

Lamar University in Texas offers a Master of Science degree in Deaf studies/Deaf education. It is CED accredited in elementary education (“Deaf Education Teacher”, 2012). Students must have American Sign Language competency when applying to Lamar University. The program requires 36 credit hours to be completed as well as at least 450 internship or practicum hours in deaf education (“M.S. Deaf Studies”, 2015). Their master’s website indicates that the program offers three classes on the different aspects of bilingualism as well as American Sign Language courses through ASL five (2015). This program ensures students are proficient in their signing skills after leaving the masters program.

Finally, Ball State University in Indiana offers a bachelor’s degree in Deaf education, as well as the opportunity to become a licensed teacher in Deaf education (“Courses”, 2015). The course catalog indicates the license requires 33 credit hours, while the bachelor’s degree requires 111 credits to complete the program (2015). Students who graduate with this undergraduate degree may become licensed in Deaf education from kindergarten through 12th grade and in mild disabilities from kindergarten through 6th grade. During the student’s sophomore year, they have the opportunity to reside at the Indiana School for the Deaf (ISD) for an immersive practicum experience. They are involved in the classroom from preschool through 12th grade. Students are not required to know sign language when they enter Ball State programs and students living at ISD are required to take through American Sign Language IV (“Courses”, 2015). Students have other practicums with mild disabilities as well as with literacy. They must complete their student

teaching in mild disabilities and with the deaf and hard of hearing (“Courses”, 2015). Ball State does not have CED accreditation (“Deaf Education Teacher”, 2012), but it is accredited by the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) (“Teachers”, 2015).

Most deaf education programs begin with the foundations of Deaf education and include courses on assessments and instructional strategies. There is a strong focus placed on literacy and language. Even though this is not the only way to teach Deaf students, the bilingual approach to education is emphasized in most Deaf education programs. Although a program may include these aspects, an individual needs to take into consideration the credibility of the program. The Council on Education of the Deaf Accreditation is a viable indicator of credibility. According to the CED Accreditation website, there are 32 programs around the U.S. that have Council on Education of the Deaf Accreditation (n.d.). “Graduates of CED Accredited programs are eligible for CED individual Certification which represents the highest standard for teachers of Deaf and hard of hearing students” (“CED Accreditation”, n.d.). California State University – Northridge, Gallaudet University, McDaniel College, National Technical Institute for the Deaf (NTID), and Lamar University programs are all CED Accredited, while Ball State University’s Deaf education teaching program is not (“Deaf Education Teacher”, 2012).

The immersive aspect of a Deaf education program is essential because it helps to prepare the future teacher with real life experiences using the language, dealing with children, and teaching the material. There are two sides to this immersive experience. The first being classroom experience with hands on opportunities with the students during practicum. Many of these programs require multiple hours inside of the classroom. Some programs require more hours in a Deaf setting, while some include more mild disabilities. It is important to understand the degree you are receiving and how much focus the program places on deafness versus

disabilities.

The other form of immersive experience is with ASL. This is similar to when kids go from 'learning to read' to 'reading to learn'. They pick up new words and learn how to read more fluently as well as gaining new information from their reading. This parallels the immersion of ASL. Future teachers taught in American Sign Language are picking up the language and becoming more fluent as well as learning other avenues of education. The experience of being taught in ASL allows students to be constantly immersed in the language. Similar to many languages, it is important to use ASL as much as possible if it is a second language as to not lose fluency.

Language fluency should be greatly emphasized throughout a Deaf education program. Gallaudet University, NTID, and McDaniel College make sure this is true by teaching all courses in ASL. Lamar University places a focus on proficient signing skills and students attending California State University – Northridge are required to pass the American Sign Language Proficiency Interview. Ball State University does not require students to pass the ASLPI. It is essential to consider the different facets needed to be strong in signing and in the knowledge of Deaf culture.

A program may not give students the extra experience or immersion they need to become a successful Deaf educator, so it is beneficial to look for those extra experiences to become proficient. A future teacher also needs to consider whether or not an undergraduate degree will be sufficient. Since most graduate programs are more focused on the specifics of Deaf culture, teaching Deaf students and signing, it may be more beneficial for an individual to get an undergraduate degree in education and extend their learning by receiving their masters in Deaf education. Undergraduate programs cover all of the general aspects of education; therefore,

graduate students have the basics and will be enriched by Deaf specific curriculum

There are many components to consider when picking a university and program. Future teachers must remember they will have a sizeable impact on the students in their classroom. They need to prepare themselves in the best way possible to give their future students the tools for success. A teacher going into Deaf education needs to pick a program that gives them the most experience with students, that prepares them to become knowledgeable in Deaf culture and ensures they are fluent in American Sign Language. The education of a teacher will change the education of his or her future students, a change that can make a difference for a lifetime.

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